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CHILD MARRIAGE IN THE CONTEXT OF COVID-19

Analysis of trends, programming and alternative approaches in the Middle East and North Africa

UNICEF MIDDLE EAST AND NORTH
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List of acronyms

| | | | |
|----------|--|--------|---|
| AS | Arab States | NCFCA | National Council for Family Affairs |
| ASRO | Arab States Regional Office | NPC | National Population Council |
| CBS | Central Bureau of Statistics | NSP | National Strategic Plan |
| CEFM | Child, Early or Forced Marriage | ONP | Office of the National Prosecutor |
| CM | Child Marriage | PSS | Psycho-Social Support |
| COVID-19 | Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome Coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV- 2) 2019 | RAF | Regional Accountability Framework of Action to End Child Marriage in the Arab States/Middle East and North Africa |
| CSO | Civil Society Organization | RH | Reproductive Health |
| DHS | Demographic Health Survey | SDG | Sustainable Development Goal |
| EU | European Union | SGBV | Sexual and Gender-Based Violence |
| FGM | Female Genital Mutilation | SOPP | Standard Operating Procedures and Protection |
| FP | Family Planning | SRH | Sexual and Reproductive Health |
| GBV | Gender-Based Violence | Tdh | Terre des hommes |
| GPECM | Global Programme to Accelerate Action to End Child Marriage | UN | United Nations |
| HH | Head of Household | UNFM | National Union of Women of Morocco |
| IDP | Internally Displaced People | UNFPA | United Nations Population Fund |
| ICRW | International Center for Research on Women | UNGA | United Nations General Assembly |
| IPC | Infection Prevention and Control | UNHCR | The United Nations Refugee Agency |
| KAP | Knowledge, Attitudes and Practices | UNICEF | United Nations Children's Fund |
| MENA | Middle East and North Africa | UPR | Universal Periodic Review |
| MHPSS | Mental Health and Psycho-Social Support | VAC | Violence against Children |
| MICS | Multiple Indicators Cluster Survey | WHO | World Health Organization |
| MOH | Ministry of Health | | |
| MP | Member of Parliament | | |
| NAP | National Action Plan | | |
| NCCM | National Council on Childhood and Motherhood | | |
| NCCW | National Council for Child Welfare | | |





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Introduction

On March 11, 2020, the World Health Organization (WHO) declared the outbreak of the novel coronavirus disease COVID-19 a global pandemic. Subsequently most countries in the world imposed restrictive measures to curb its spread, including social distancing, prohibiting mass gatherings, school closures and in some cases complete lockdown of people’s movement.

The COVID-19 pandemic is likely to have detrimental effects on efforts to end harmful practices, such as child marriage. Stay-at-home orders and other measures implemented during the COVID-19 pandemic have in fact led to a “shadow pandemic” of gender-based violence. Moreover, lockdown measures have disrupted children’s routines and essential prevention, protection and support services.¹

In 2020, the Third Committee of the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) agreed its fourth resolution on Child, Early or Forced Marriage (CEFM). The resolution calls on UN Member States to strengthen and accelerate action to address CEFM. This resolution includes important additions on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on efforts to end CEFM. In particular it:

There is not enough evidence yet on the impact of the pandemic on child marriage globally and in the Middle East and North Africa/Arab States (MENA/AS) region. Nevertheless, it is estimated that up to 10 million more girls will be at risk of becoming child brides in the next decade as a result of COVID-19.³

Child marriage and its drivers are complex and vary within and across countries. Nevertheless, given the adverse implications of COVID-19 on the global economy, particularly for low-income countries where child marriage practice is more prevalent, and the fact that poverty is one of the drivers of child marriage worldwide, cases of child marriages are expected to increase in vulnerable and poor communities. Additionally, the impact of COVID-19 restriction measures and policies has aggravated the situation, especially in access to services for prevention and response to child marriage.

Highlights that COVID–19 threatens to considerably slow down and even reverse progress from the past decade on ending CEFM.

Expresses concern that the impact of the COVID–19 pandemic diverts attention and resources away from efforts to end CEFM, especially at the local level.

Notes that the implications of school closures and restrictions on movement are likely to increase risks faced by girls, including “already married” girls.

Emphasizes that these risks are even further exacerbated in humanitarian situations.²

¹ UNICEF. 2020. Technical Note on COVID-19 and harmful practices.

² United Nations General Assembly, seventy-fifth session, 10 November 2020, Third Committee Agenda Item 68n (a) Promotion and Protection of the Rights of Children and Child Early and Forced Marriage, A/c.3/25/L.18/Rev.1

³ UNICEF. March 2021. ‘COVID-19. A threat to progress against child marriage’ According to UNFPA projections of April 2020, COVID-19 will disrupt efforts to end child marriage, potentially resulting in an additional 13 million child marriages taking place between 2020 and 2030 that could otherwise have been averted. For more information see Interim Technical Note by UNFPA, with contributions from Avenir Health, Johns Hopkins University (USA) and Victoria University (Australia). 27 April 2020. ‘Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Family Planning and Ending Gender-based Violence, Female Genital Mutilation and Child Marriage: Pandemic threatens achievement of the Transformative Results committed to by UNFPA.’

Because of this pandemic, there are no job opportunities anymore, which leads the poor to think of marrying girls off and sacrifice their childhood.

- Adolescent respondent

AIM OF THIS STUDY

As of 31st May, the number of COVID-19 cases in the MENA region crossed 8,856,159.⁴ A preliminary estimate of the economic impact of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 said the MENA region was expected to lose at least \$42 billion in gross domestic product.⁵

This study was commissioned with the purpose of generating more evidence to analyse trends and drivers in rates of child marriage during the COVID-19 pandemic in the MENA region, with a focus on six countries. The study also documents promising practices and interventions to curb the impact of COVID-19 on child marriage and bolster efforts to eliminate child marriage by 2020.

The report is based on case studies and examples from Djibouti, Jordan, Egypt, Morocco, Sudan and Yemen and covers the following areas:

1. Overview of child marriage and related issues.
2. Implications of COVID-19 on child marriage prevention and response.
3. Documented changes or trends in child marriage since COVID-19.
4. Contributing factors to changes in the rates of child marriage during COVID-19.
5. Promising practices in child marriage programming during COVID-19.

METHODOLOGY

The following data collection methods were used to collect information:

1. Literature review.
2. Interviews with Child Protection Officers/Specialists, Gender-Based Violence (GBV) Specialists and Gender Officers or Humanitarian Officers in UNFPA and UNICEF country offices.
3. Interviews with international and local civil society organisations (CSO), partner organizations, women's groups, etc.
4. Questionnaires to local partners and service providers.

5. Focus group discussions with community leaders and service providers, facilitated by implementing partner of UNICEF Egypt country office.
6. Questionnaires to adolescents and young people by UNICEF Morocco's implementing partner.

LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

Due to the constraints imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic, the study was conducted remotely and could not benefit from field visits in the six targeted countries. Despite the engagement and collaboration of country offices and local partners, the following limitations were observed:

1. Delays in receiving responses and limited contacts with stakeholders and beneficiaries.
2. Limited availability of both qualitative and quantitative data related to the impact of COVID-19 on child marriage. Desk reviews and stakeholders interviews formed the basis of the methodology.
3. Difficulties in establishing trends due to the limited availability of national data.

Despite the limitations, the study managed to gather relevant information, such as the extent to which infection prevention and control measures affected the implementation of child marriage programmes and activities and alternative strategies adopted during COVID-19.

There is potential for more in-depth insights once the restrictions imposed by COVID-19 have eased, allowing for direct research in the field and more official and/or more qualitative data.

⁴ MEED. 22 April 2021. Latest on the region's COVID-19 recovery

⁵ Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia. September 2020. 'COVID-19 Economic Cost to the Arab Region'

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Context

CHILD MARRIAGE IN THE MENA REGION

Various terms are used to define child marriage or one of its manifestations, including child, early or forced marriage. Child marriage and early marriage define almost the same concept, which is any legal or customary union involving a boy or girl age 18. Any marriage entered into without free and full consent to the union is forced. In international conventions and in many countries, child marriage is considered as a form of forced marriage because children under 18 are deemed incapable of expressing their full, free and informed consent.

Child marriage constitutes a severe human rights violation, often jeopardising the education, health, well-being and future of millions of children in the world as well as being an extreme manifestation of GBV. It is also a violation of security and protection from violence and rights to life and education. Child marriage is a grave deterrent to development. It is a harmful practice that has a negative impact especially on girls, deeply rooted in gender inequality and stereotyped gender-based roles and discrimination.

This complex phenomenon is driven by multiple, diversified and interconnected factors, varying within and across countries. Poverty, absence of or low levels of education, community pressure, gender-discriminatory social and cultural norms, absence or non-enforcement of laws, insecurity and other harmful practices determine and perpetuate the practice. Girls living in rural areas or from poorer households have a higher risk of being married early.

Every child has the right to be protected from this harmful practice, which has devastating consequences both at the individual and societal levels. Therefore, child marriage is now firmly on the global development agenda, most prominently through its inclusion in Sustainable Development Goal on gender equality (SDG5), target 5.3, which aims to eliminate all harmful practices including child marriage by 2030.

According to UNICEF,⁶ the world is home to 650 million child brides, including currently married girls and women who were first married in childhood, of whom 40 million child brides are in the MENA region. Some 50 million of them were married at or after age 15 but before age 18 and nine million were married before age 15. The scale of child marriage in the MENA region is close to global trends, with one in five girls married before age 18 and one in 25 before age 15.

In recent years, there have been 700,000 child brides each year in the MENA region. The prevalence of child marriage varies within the region, from a high of one in three in Sudan and Yemen to a low of one in 50 in Tunisia. Many countries show disparities in child marriage between urban and rural populations; the largest such disparities are found in Sudan and Egypt. In all countries but Yemen, Syria and Algeria, women from the poorest households are at least twice as likely to have married in childhood as women from the richest households. A number of countries in the region, such as Egypt, Oman and Yemen, have made great strides in reducing child marriage in the past generation.⁷

It is important to note that child marriage increases during violent conflict⁸ and such an increase was reported in Yemen. This is also true of girls affected by conflict in Syria as evidenced by the growing number of Syrian refugee girls being married in Jordan, Lebanon, Iraq and Turkey. Child marriage is often used by families in times of crisis as a negative mechanism to cope with economic hardship and violence.⁹

In some countries, progress has been made towards the prevention of child marriage through, for example, the implementation of a uniform minimum legal age of marriage of 18. Nevertheless, many MENA countries provide exceptions to the minimum age of marriage upon parental consent or endorsement from a court. Customary or religious laws (such as Sharia law) that allows a lower minimum age of marriage often take precedence over national law. The granting of judicial exception to allow an underage marriage is seen, for example, in Jordan and Morocco where despite having set the legal age for marriage as 18, both countries

6 UNICEF. 2018. 'A profile of Child Marriage in the Middle East and North Africa'

7 Ibid.

8 Save the Children. 'Child Marriage: The Devastating End of Childhood'

9 UNICEF Middle East and North Africa Regional Office in collaboration with International Center for Research on Women. 2017. 'Child Marriage in the Middle East and North Africa'

provide judges with the discretion allow younger girls to marry. In both Sudan and Yemen, puberty is broadly used to determine the age at when it is deemed appropriate and acceptable for girls to marry.¹⁰

As part of joint work by the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) and UNICEF to eliminate child marriage, the Global Programme to Accelerate Action to End Child Marriage (GPECM) was launched in 2016 in 12 of the most high-prevalence or high-burden countries, including Yemen. The Global Programme was built to capture the complementarity of the work of UNFPA and UNICEF towards eradicating child marriage and uses a range of strategies, working with multiple partners at the national, regional and global levels. UNFPA ASRO and UNICEF MENA are working relentlessly to address child marriage in the region through the Global Programme, supporting different country office programmes and interventions.

To strengthen the response to child marriage in the Middle East and North Africa and support countries to eliminate the practice, UNICEF and UNFPA along with regional and global partners have developed and adopted the Regional Accountability Framework of Action to End Child Marriage in the Arab States/Middle East and North Africa (RAF).

The RAF's purpose is to realize the rights of adolescents and young girls and to accelerate at-scale efforts to contribute to their well-being, participation, protection and empowerment. The framework embodies a commitment to action by the United Nations, civil society and academic actors working to end child marriage. UNICEF, UNFPA and the RAF consortium of partners are committed to accelerating progress focusing on the following strategies:

- Empower and strengthen girls' voices and agency through education, health services, life skills and economic opportunities.
- Engage with communities to change social norms and behaviours.
- Promote and scale up cross-sectoral engagement.
- Strengthen legal and policy frameworks.
- Support evidence generation.

CHILD MARRIAGE IN THE SIX TARGETED COUNTRIES

Egypt

The Egyptian Child Law of 2008 sets the minimum age of marriage at age 18 for females and males but does not criminalise child marriage. Child marriage is still practiced in some regions. According to the Egypt census of 2017, nearly one in every 20 girls (4 per cent) between the ages of 15 and 17 and one in every 10 (11 per cent) adolescent girls between the ages of 15 and 19 are either currently married or were married before, with large differentials between rural and urban areas.¹¹

The determinants of child marriage in Egypt include the absence of or low education, poverty, harmful practices including female genital mutilation (FGM), traditions of family honour, trafficking, and displacement.

Social norms and inequitable gender norms play an important role in child marriage, affecting adolescent girls' wellbeing, educational attainment and exposure to harmful practices, such as FGM, which is not exclusive to a particular religion but runs deep in the cultural practices.¹² FGM can be considered as a contributing factor to child marriage because some communities view it as a passage to adulthood and readiness for marriage.¹³

Girls belonging to poor households are more likely to be married early¹⁴ and those living in rural settings are three times more likely to be married early than those in urban areas.¹⁵ Girls with higher education are less likely to be married early than those with no or low education.¹⁶

Another driver of child marriage among some communities in Egypt is trafficking. Cases have been reported of Egyptian girls who temporarily marry men from from abroad (tourist husbands) in exchange for money.¹⁷ These so-called orfi or summer marriages are a way of bypassing anti-trafficking laws or religious prescriptions against sexual intercourse outside marriage.¹⁸

Egypt is hosting a growing number of displaced people, mostly from Syria. Evidence from neighbouring countries have shown increased rates of child marriages among Syrian girls.¹⁹ According to a 2020 study,²⁰ the drivers of child marriage among the displaced/ refugee population are multi-dimensional and vary across nationalities and place of origin. Displacement is seen both as a driver and a moderator of child marriage amongst Syrian refugees.²¹

In 2014, Egypt developed the National Strategic Plan (NSP) for Prevention of Early Marriage led by the National Population Council (NPC), with the aim of reducing the prevalence of child marriage by 50 per cent within a five-year period.²²

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ National Council for Childhood & Motherhood Child Rights Observatory, 2018. Policy for Action Issue 1. 'Ending Child Marriage'

¹² Ibid. CAPMAS. 2017. Egypt Census of Population, Housing and Establishments, Egypt.

¹³ Unicef. 2017. 'Child Marriage in the Middle East and North Africa: A multi-country study'

¹⁴ Ministry of Health and Population, Egypt and the DHS Programme. 2015. 'Demographic and Health Survey 2014'

¹⁵ National Council for Childhood & Motherhood Child Rights Observatory. 2018. Policy for Action Issue 1. 'Ending Child Marriage'

¹⁶ Ministry of Health and Population, Egypt and the DHS Programme. 2015. 'Demographic and Health Survey 2014'

¹⁷ <https://2009-2017state.gov/jtip/rts/tiprpt/2015/index.htm> <http://www.wluml.org/sites/wluml.org/files/Shadow%20Report%20CEDAW%20EACPE.pdf>

¹⁸ UN Women Africa. 2019. 'Multi-Country Analytical Study of Legislation, Policies, Interventions and Cultural Practices on Child Marriage in Africa'

¹⁹ <https://www.girlsnotbrides.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/05/Child-marriage-in-humanitarian-settings.pdf>

²⁰ UNFPA, UNICEF, Women's Refugee Commission, Johns Hopkins University. 2020. 'Child Marriage in Humanitarian Settings in the Arab States Region: Study Results from Djibouti, Egypt, Kurdistan region of Iraq and Yemen.' Synthesis report.

²¹ Ibid.

²² National Council for Childhood & Motherhood Child Rights Observatory, 2018. Policy for Action Issue 1. 'Ending Child Marriage'

The political will to end child marriage and enabling opportunities for adolescent girl development and empowerment is strong. The National Council for Childhood and Motherhood (NCCM) has been committed to ending child marriage. It provides reporting mechanisms through the Child Helpline 16000 and the Family Counselling line 16021 and support for children and families. Other leading governmental bodies include the National Council for Women (NCW).

Sudan

According to the Multiple Indicators Cluster Survey (MICS) 2014, 34 per cent of Sudanese girls are married before age 18 and 12 per cent are married before age 15. According to the 2018 Simple Spatial Survey,²³ the prevalence of female carers age 20-24 years who married at or before age 15 was 26.6 per cent. The proportion of respondents who married before age 18 was much higher at 60.2 per cent, suggesting that many marriages take place between the ages of 15 and 18.

Child marriage is commonly practiced in rural areas and among a wide range of tribes. Patterns of early marriage differ from nomads to non-nomads. It may also be justified differently based on ethnicity. Among nomads (Arabs), it is common to marry young girls to young boys. In other groups, especially some clusters of non-nomads, young girls are married to older men.²⁴

Drivers of child marriage in Sudan are poverty, absence of or low level of education, harmful practices such as FGM, religion, social norms, cultural pressure to preserve “family honour”, and power dynamics.

Some 54 per cent of women living in poor households were married before age 18 compared with 19 per cent belonging to the richest households.²⁵ Many families negotiate a dowry (mahr) consisting of money and gifts by the groom, making it an incentive for families to marry their daughters young. Some 55 per cent of women with no education were married before age 18, compared with 3 per cent of women who completed higher education. Girls finishing education are stigmatised as *agir* (infertile) or *bayra* (not asked for marriage).²⁶ According to a 2016 study, girls who have undergone FGM are at higher risk of child marriage.²⁷

Legislation requires revision since there is no minimum age for marriage. The Sudan Personal Status Law of Muslims 1994 states that a guardian can give permission for a girl to marry when she has reached puberty and from age 10 with the permission of a judge.²⁸

National responses to child marriage are held back because it is still permitted by law²⁹ and it is widely believed that

child marriage is deeply rooted in religious principles.³⁰ Many communities believe that a girl is ready to marry when she reaches maturity (*tamyeez*) around age ten.

Sudan recently endorsed a national strategy on child marriage, which has the overall objective of expediting the end of child marriage, achieving social and legal protection for children against the effects of child marriage, and affirming their rights to education and health.³¹

Yemen

Child marriage in Yemen is a social norm that is deeply embedded. It is widely practiced in rural and urban areas and supported as a means to control young people of both sexes.³²

According to the most recent demographic health survey (DHS) data of 2013, 32 per cent of girls in Yemen are married before age 18 and 9 per cent before age 15. The conflict and ensuing humanitarian repercussions have weakened the position of adolescent girls in Yemeni society and led to a near erosion of protection mechanisms, increasing their vulnerabilities.

Poverty is a crucial factor leading to child marriage in Yemen. It is the poorest country in the Middle East and the “bride price” paid by the groom’s family is seen as an important source of income.

A knowledge, attitudes and practices (KAP) survey conducted in 2016 revealed that a higher number of girls were married early during the current war. Some families also married their sons early, in some cases at age sixteen, to prevent them from joining armed groups.³³

“Tourist marriages” with men from abroad, such as those seen in Egypt with the purpose of sexual exploitation, are also reported in Yemen.³⁴

Girls’ limited access to education is another driver of child marriage. Girls were withdrawn from school at the age of puberty to prepare for marriage even before the conflict,³⁵ which further aggravated the situation.³⁶

The Yemeni Personal Status law does not set any minimum legal age of marriage and the Yemeni government’s Sharia Committee has blocked attempts to make the age of marriage either 15 or 18.³⁷

23 Federal Ministry of Health, General Directorate of Primary Health Care, National Nutrition Programme Sudan. 2018. Simple Spatial Survey Method (SRM II).

24 UNICEF Sudan and National Council for Child Welfare. 2013. ‘KAP Study Early/Child Marriage in Six States (South Darfur, East Darfur, West Darfur, Central Darfur, Gedarfir and Khartoum) in Sudan’. p. 9.

25 Central Bureau of Statistics and UNICEF Sudan. 2016. ‘Sudan Multiple Indicators Cluster Survey 2014’.

26 University of Bergen and Chr. Michelsen Institute. 2017. ‘Girls, Child Marriage, and Education in Red Sea State, Sudan: Perspectives on Girls’ Freedom to Choose’.

27 UNICEF. 2016. ‘Female Genital Mutilation/Cutting and Child Marriage in Sudan: Are there any changes taking place?’.

28 Girls Not Brides. Sudan.

29 UNICEF. 2016. ‘Child Notice Sudan’.

30 UNICEF and International Center for Research on Women. 2017. ‘Sudan Country Brief: UNICEF Regional Study on Child Marriage in the Middle East and North Africa’.

31 Republic of the Sudan, Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs. 2020. ‘National Strategy to end Child Marriage in Sudan 2020-2030’.

32 UNICEF and Tadhafur Programme for Safe Age of Marriage. 2017. ‘Child Marriage Survey’.

33 UNICEF and Tadhafur Programme for Safe Age of Marriage. 2017. ‘Child Marriage Survey’. p. 4.

34 UNICEF and International Center for Research on Women. 2017. ‘Yemen Country Brief: UNICEF Regional Study on Child Marriage in the Middle East and North Africa’.

35 Human Rights Watch. 2011. ‘How come you allow little girls to get married?’.

36 International Rescue Committee. 2019. ‘Protection, participation and potential: women and girls in Yemen’s war’.

37 Girls Not Brides. Yemen.

Jordan

Factors contributing to child marriage in Jordan include poverty and the social pressure to provide “sutra”, which in Arabic means attaining security in life and protection from hardship, a concept that has roots in Islam and is culturally accepted among people of all faiths in the region.

Since the beginning of the crisis in Syria in 2011, Jordan has become the third-largest host country of Syrian refugees, the majority of whom rely on humanitarian assistance. Syrian, Iraqi and Palestinian refugee girls living in Jordan are particularly vulnerable to child marriage.³⁸

In some instances, refugee girls are married to a Jordanian spouse and/or move into the host community. In 2014, one in four marriages registered by the Syrian refugee community in Jordan involved a girl aged under 18, often because of the perceived necessity to keep girls safe from sexual violence in refugee camps.³⁹ Among those living in the camps, general insecurity and sexual harassment are commonly reported as reasons for arranging for girls to be married at a young age. Parents see child marriage as a way to protect their daughters – and their family’s honour – from possible sexual assault and other kinds of hardship.⁴⁰

According to the Jordanian Personal Status law, the minimum legal age of marriage is age 18. However, individuals aged 16 can be married with judicial consent. Under regulations introduced in 2017, an exception to the minimum legal age of 18 for marriage can be granted if there is no more than a 15-year age difference between the girl and man, the man has no other wives, and the marriage does not prevent the girl from continuing her education.⁴¹ Before approving such a marriage the judge, *inter alia*, must be satisfied that the groom is “appropriate” in terms of religion and wealth.⁴²

Morocco

In Morocco, the Ministry of Justice registered 25,514 child marriage cases in 2018, corresponding to a prevalence rate of 9 per cent. However, statistical information may not reflect reality as many child marriages are not officially registered.⁴³ Between 2006 and 2018, approximately 32,000 requests for marriage to children were submitted each year, 85 per cent of which were approved.⁴⁴ Latest data from the public prosecutor’s office showed 27,623 requests in 2019 and 99 per cent of the girls were aged between 15 and 17.

In 2004, the Government of Morocco introduced a new family code, (*Moudawana*), which expanded the rights of women. These included, *inter alia*, raising the minimum

female and male age of marriage from 15 to 18. However, discretionary power was left to judges to grant exceptions to the rule.⁴⁵ Most child marriages, especially in rural areas, are carried out under customary Muslim law (*Al Fatiha*) and judges are forced to recognise the marriage retrospectively.⁴⁶

A 2018 law on combating violence against women⁴⁷ defined and criminalised acts such as harassment, aggression, sexual exploitation and forced marriage of girls and women. However, several Moroccan NGOs want a stronger law addressing all forms of violence against women who are at risk of domestic violence, intimate partner violence and child marriage.

In Morocco, child marriage essentially manifests itself in the form of temporary marriages/agreements, consanguineous marriages and polygamy, according to *Moudawana* principles.⁴⁸ As in other countries, temporary marriages are used as a way of bypassing the Islamic proscription on sex outside wedlock.⁴⁹

Poverty, absence or low level of education,⁵⁰ traditional gender norms, social pressure to preserve “family honour”, religion and social pressures based on unequal gender norms are the main drivers of child marriage in Morocco.⁵¹

Marrying a daughter at a young age offers many perceived social and economic benefits to the family: it increases the dowry, alleviates a financial burden in the home, decreases the risk of out-of-wedlock pregnancy, avoids stigma and ensures family honour.⁵² There are cases of families who resort to child marriage if they suspect the couple is in a sexual relationship; sex outside marriage is a crime under Article 490 of the Criminal Code.⁵³

A recent study in Morocco showed that three-quarters of parents of children married before the age of 18 were illiterate or had not completed primary school.⁵⁴ One-quarter of Moroccan girls with no education were married by age 18, compared with 7 per cent of girls with secondary or further education.⁵⁵ Some family court judges authorise child marriages for economic reasons in poorer regions.⁵⁶

38 Gender and Adolescence: Global Evidence. 2017. ‘Adolescent Girls in Jordan’

39 <https://www.girlsnotbrides.org/resource-centre/young-wed-growing-problem-child-marriage-among-syrian-girls-jordan/>

40 Save the Children. 2014. ‘Too young to wed. The growing problem of child marriage among Syrian girls in Jordan.’ p. 4.

41 Girls Not Brides. Jordan.

42 UNICEF. 2014. ‘A study on early marriage in Jordan.’ p.12.

43 BMC International Health and Human Rights, 16 October 2013. ‘Determinants of child and forced marriage in Morocco: stakeholder perspectives on health, policies and human rights’

44 CESE. 2019. ‘Que faire face à la persistance du mariage d’enfants au Maroc.’

45 UNICEF Middle East and North Africa Regional Office in collaboration with the International Center for Research on Women. 2017. Morocco Country Brief: UNICEF Regional Study on Child Marriage in the Middle East and North Africa’

46 www.girlsnotbrides.org

47 Ministry of Justice. 2018. *La lutte contre la violence faites aux femmes.*

48 UN Women Africa. 2019. ‘Multi-Country Analytical Study of Legislation, Policies, Interventions and Cultural Practices on Child Marriage in Africa’

49 <https://africa.unwomen.org/en/digital-library/publications/2018/multicountry-fgm>

50 Girls Not Brides. 2013. ‘A teacher’s journey to keep girls in school and avoid child marriage in Morocco’

51 *Ibid.*

52 UNICEF Middle East and North Africa Regional Office in collaboration with the International Center for Research on Women. 2017. Morocco Country Brief: UNICEF Regional Study on Child Marriage in the Middle East and North Africa’

53 *Ibid.*

54 Droit et Justice, 2020. *Etude nationale sur le mariage des mineurs.*

55 www.girlsnotbrides.org

56 BMC International Health and Human Rights, 16 October 2013. ‘Determinants of child and forced marriage in Morocco: stakeholder perspectives on health, policies and human rights’

Djibouti

According to the 2019 Djibouti national survey on violence against women, 3.3 per cent girls age 10–14 (2.1 per cent in urban areas and 8.8 per cent in rural areas) and 10 per cent of girls age 15–17 (8.2 per cent in urban areas and 18.1 per cent in rural areas) are married. The average age at first marriage is 23.2 years (23.5 in urban areas and 21.3 in rural areas).⁵⁷

A study conducted by UNHCR revealed that refugee populations had lower rates of marriage for girls age 10–19 than their host community counterparts. The prevalence of married girls age 10–19 was 7.8 per cent for Yemeni refugees and 11.8 per cent for nearby host populations. For those currently married girls residing in Somali sampling locations, the prevalence rate was 6.6 per cent for refugees and 14.5 per cent for adjacent host communities.⁵⁸

The drivers of child marriage in Djibouti are cultural and social norms and poverty. The minimum legal age of marriage is 18 under the 2002 family code. Nevertheless, marriage is possible under age 18 if authorised by a guardian or a judge if the guardian refuses.

During its 2013 Universal Periodic Review (UPR), Djibouti supported recommendations to develop and implement a comprehensive strategy to eliminate harmful practices, including child marriage. It also agreed to examine recommendations to increase awareness and provide training to eliminate child marriage. During its 2018 UPR, Djibouti agreed to examine recommendations to strengthen the implementation of legislation.⁵⁹

“Because of lack of money, families are obliged to marry off their children. The state has allocated aid for people. Some benefited from it and some didn’t.”

- Adolescent respondent

57 Ministère de la Femme et de la Famille and Institut National de la Statistique de Djibouti/INS. 2019. ‘Djibouti- Enquête nationale sur les violences faites aux femmes.’

58 UNFPA, UNICEF, Women’s Refugee Commission, Johns Hopkins University (USA). 2020. ‘Child Marriage in Humanitarian Settings in the Arab States Region: Study Results from Djibouti, Egypt, Kurdistan region of Iraq and Yemen.’ Synthesis report.

59 Girls Not Brides. Djibouti.







Impact of COVID-19 on child marriage in the MENA region

The COVID-19 pandemic is having a significant impact on the economies of the Middle East and North Africa.

UNICEF with partners conducted telephone surveys covering nearly 7,000 households in seven countries in the Middle East and North Africa to better understand the impact of COVID-19 on children in the region.⁶⁰ Around 95 per cent of the respondents stated that their children were negatively affected by the consequences of the pandemic. Many children were not able to benefit from remote learning due to lack of resources, such as internet connection or lack of support. Some 30 per cent said during periods of strict lockdown, children were not able to access health and nutritious food at least once.⁶¹

TRENDS IN CHILD MARRIAGE

There is a lack of adequate national data on child marriage in 2020 during the period of COVID-19. But the majority of key informants interviewed for this study said they assumed that the percentage of child marriage had increased and is expected to increase further.

Among the six countries that were part of the study, only **Jordan** produced national data related to child marriage in 2020, showing a slight increase. The simplicity of marriage procedures and the reduction of costs during this period possibly contributed to this increase. The high costs of marriage had been behind the reluctance of young men to marry together with high unemployment and low average income.

The annual statistical report for 2020 issued by the Supreme Judge Department showed an increase in the rate of child marriages, with the number of marriages of girls under age 18 reaching 7,964 cases, or 11.7 per cent, compared with 10.6 per cent in 2019. The number of marriages of boys under age 18 was 194 cases during 2020. The

increase in early marriages occurred despite the Supreme Judge Department issuing strict instructions for the granting of permission of the marriage of minors.

COVID-19 also led to an increase in child marriage within refugee camps in Jordan. In June 2019, in Zaatari camp, 30 out of 60 marriages were child marriages. In June 2020, the rate increased to 13 child marriages out of 16 marriages. In July 2020, the rate was relatively high at 57 per cent with 37 child marriages out of 65 marriages. Overall, in 2019, the rate of child marriages was 58 per cent while in July 2020 the rate was 60 per cent.

In Azraq camp, in June 2019, two out of 13 were child marriages (15 per cent) while in June 2020, eight out of 14 marriages were deemed as child marriages (57 per cent). In July 2020, out of a total of 17 marriages registered in Sharia court, 13 were child marriages (76 per cent).

Key informants interviewed about the effect of COVID-19 on child marriage in Jordan said they feared that child marriage would increase in the medium to long term as more families facing the detrimental economic effects of the pandemic used it as a negative coping mechanism.

In **Sudan**, despite the unavailability of official data, all key informants reported that many child marriages had taken place during the COVID-19 pandemic. One said it was common to prepare for weddings when there was an interruption in schooling as happened during the 2019 unrest.

⁶⁰ UNICEF, November 2020. 'Impact of COVID-19 on Children in the Middle East and North Africa'

⁶¹ Ibid.

UNICEF and its implementing partners in **Morocco** shared a questionnaire with adolescent girls and boys mostly living in urban areas to understand their views about the impact of COVID-19 on child marriage. Most of them said they were not sure if COVID-19 had impacted child marriage. Nevertheless, the great majority replied that COVID-19 had impacted their life for the worse. School closures, increased amount of time spent at home, not being able to meet their friends, lower family incomes and domestic tension were the most common reported effects.

However, one girl spoke of a positive impact:

“Due to COVID-19, I was able to benefit from working remotely even after the pandemic and to make time for sports and learn other skills.”

- Young female respondent from Morocco

In **Egypt**, there are no national data on child marriage rates during COVID-19 but key informants said the national child helpline received more calls about child marriage. During a focus group discussion with 32 community leaders facilitated by an NGO in Assiut, it emerged that many of them thought there was no link between the pandemic and child marriage or that child marriage did not increase. Nevertheless, service providers interviewed by the same NGO in Assiut seemed more inclined to think that was an increased rate of child marriage as a result of COVID-19.

There are no data on child marriage rates in **Djibouti** during COVID-19. During the first lockdown, all services and activities were shut down, including those for the prevention of GBV and FGM. According to one key informant, FGM does not appear to have increased during the lockdown period because hospitals were closed and both UNFPA and UNICEF have facilitated monitoring.

FACTORS CONTRIBUTING TO CHILD MARRIAGE DURING COVID-19

The two main factors contributing to rising cases of child marriage during COVID-19 in the six countries were increased poverty and school closures.

In **Egypt**, girls not going to schools, lockdown measures, increased unemployment and poverty affecting families, and social norms were believed to be factors behind more child marriage of girls and child labour for boys. Travel restrictions meant that child marriage linked to trafficking was not expected to increase.

One community leader noted:

“The poor economic situation and the lack of resources for families increased very much after the pandemic. Consequently, child marriage for girls increased in an attempt to reduce burdens and spending.”

- Community leader from Egypt

In **Yemen**, some women and girls, particularly female and child-led households from internally displaced people (IDP) and migrant backgrounds who have lost their income, have adopted negative coping mechanisms including:

1. Desperate families marrying off their young daughters for a dowry, which they claim protects their daughters from hunger.
2. Working on the streets, begging and early marriage, particularly during school closures, which exposes them to further risk of GBV and exploitation.⁶²

In **Sudan**, lack of income and interruption of education are the main factors contributing to an increase of child marriage during COVID-19.

“There are no statistics reporting whether child marriage increased during COVID-19 in the country. However, Yemen is a humanitarian setting and by default, people or families had adopted negative coping mechanisms even before the beginning of the pandemic. We know that in humanitarian settings, GBV increases and child marriage increases, especially given that we do not have a minimum age for marriage in Yemen. So, I assume that it is not decreasing by any means due to the deteriorating economic situation and families adopt negative coping mechanisms, such as marrying their daughters at a very early age.”

- Key informant from Yemen.

62 Gender network, Cluster Gender and GBV Focal Points Network in Yemen. November 2020-January 2021. ‘The Gendered impact of COVID-19 in Yemen’

“By marrying off their daughters early, a few families managed to cut some of the family’s living expenses. Furthermore, as all are at home and people come in and out, some parents marry off their daughters early since they fear scandal and shame if they get pregnant.”

- Key informant from Sudan

Sustained disruption of education is expected to lead to more school dropouts, especially girls, and more child labour and child marriage in **Sudan**. Key informants said the evidence for this included:

- Teachers who noticed girls coming back married to university and colleges.
- Social media and Facebook groups showing child marriage.
- Informal reports by girls who work in schools and universities.

In **Morocco**, COVID-19 is expected to increase child marriage by exposing many vulnerable families to the loss of jobs and income and consequently to more poverty and exclusion. School closures made young girls more vulnerable to abuse and child marriage, especially adolescent girls in marginalised areas lacking access to distance education and digital learning platforms and resources. A study conducted by UNICEF and the High Commission for Planning in Morocco showed that the rate of students who have continued distance education on a regular basis was low, only 42 per cent for secondary schools and college and 49 per cent for secondary schools in rural areas.

Key informants reported that factors contributing to rising cases of child marriage during COVID-19 in **Jordan** were mostly economic factors. In addition, one key informant said that adolescents perceived movement restrictions as very onerous and that the increased controlling behaviour of families might have played a role in the desire of adolescents themselves to get married. The rise in child marriage and violence against children (VAC) in general was related also to school closures and the increased time that children had to spend at home.



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Main services and interventions to prevent child marriage

Many field activities implemented by UNICEF to prevent child marriage had to stop during lockdown in **Egypt** before interventions started again in August 2020. In February 2020 before the beginning of the pandemic, UNICEF launched some socio-behavioural activities in the framework of its foster-parenting project, showing docudramas on different topics including FGM and child marriage in clubs of about 30 people, including mothers, fathers and children. In order to avoid spreading the virus, viewings of docudramas and subsequent discussions were held in open spaces during the summer.

In **Jordan**, UNICEF is currently working on a strategy for Zaatari camp where there has been an increase in child marriage of involving communities in self-evaluation. The interventions will be piloted in the camp and, based on the learnings, will be replicated in other hotspots and at the national level.

In **Morocco** in 2019, UNICEF launched the project “Fight against sexual violence against girls and against early marriage,” which promotes positive social norms and a protective legal framework for girls against sexual violence and child marriage.

As part of World Children’s Day on 20 November and the “16 Days of Activism to End Violence against Women and Girls” international campaign, UNICEF aimed to raise awareness about child marriage. The campaign reached a total of 2,506,718 people and generated 162,600 engagements across UNICEF’s different social networks (Facebook, Twitter and Instagram) UNFPA Morocco held a conference with NGOs, lawyers, judges and journalists and media professionals to discuss various aspects of child marriage in the context of COVID-19.

In terms of psycho-social support (PSS), UNICEF partnered with a child psychiatrist to develop a series of videos to provide adolescents, youth and parents with tips about dealing with the impact of COVID-19. In addition, UNICEF launched a formative study on social norms related to violence against children and violence against girls. UNICEF and the public prosecutor’s office are also conducting a study on the legal framework and judicial practices in relation to child marriage, aiming to develop the capacities and awareness of magistrates and judges to better assess and defend the best interests of a child and to strengthen their

role in protecting children from marriage. UNICEF, along with UN Women, UNFPA and the National Observatory of Human Development are developing a national study on child marriage, focusing on prevalence, profiles, costs and policy impacts.

In **Sudan**, there are several child marriage prevention initiatives using community facilitators and religious and key community leaders. UNICEF supports girls’ clubs in a number of schools in ten states. Before the pandemic, these clubs provided the opportunity for a successful and coordinated exchange between mothers, girls and teachers, in the course of which the issue of child marriage was also tackled. Sometimes during these discussions, cases of child marriage were reported. These activities had to stop because of the lockdown and school closures.

The GPECM, of which **Yemen** is part, had been modified to take account of the humanitarian crisis. Utilising a whole-community approach to empowering girls and engaging community stakeholders, it has four components: empowerment, community engagement, systems and evidence generation.⁶³ Based on a strategy to engage with communities, elaborated in 2018, anyone with the potential to influence the community is identified to lead social dialogue on child protection issues. Most of these community activities were suspended due to COVID-19 restrictions.

In **Djibouti** both UNICEF and UNFPA try to integrate work on child marriage within activities for the prevention of GBV and harmful practices, particularly FGM. For instance, during the “16 Days of Activism to End Violence against Women and Girls” international campaign, UNFPA posted videos on social media platforms about various forms of GBV, including child marriage.

63 UNFPA, UNICEF Global Programme to end Child Marriage. 2020. ‘Preventing and Responding to Child Marriage in Humanitarian Settings: The Global Programme approach.’ p. 5.

IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON CHILD MARRIAGE PREVENTION ACTIVITIES

Morocco, COVID-19 measures impacted implementation of the project “Fight against sexual violence against girls and against early marriage”, particularly communication about interventions to increase awareness of the negative impact of child marriage at the community level.⁶⁴ A UNICEF partner NGO said because of COVID-19 and related movement restrictions, field activities related to awareness, sensitisation and advocacy had to be stopped.

In **Sudan**, the issues related to child marriage are addressed through the FGM programme and COVID-19 measures affected their implementation. Alternative strategies included working through media platforms. Private and international schools adopted digital learning, but state schools could not due to lack of facilities. Afhad University contributed to few online training courses on GBV, including child marriage, for community leaders and youth committees.

In **Yemen**, COVID-19, increased the risk of GBV.⁶⁵ Most UNICEF activities and vocational training were suspended because of school closures. Training on remote case-management was organised and partners who had the capacity to adapt arranged telephone PSS for GBV survivors. Confidentiality was a concern for GBV survivors/potential victims because family members might have been able to listen to telephone conversations so individual phone counselling was changed to general discussions involving the whole family. One of the lessons learned was that to protect potential GBV victims, it was better to use this kind of approach because it was the safest way to maintain contact with potential victims.

UNFPA in the north of **Yemen** carried out a number of activities related to child marriage, which were only partially impacted by COVID-19 measures. During lockdown, outreach and awareness-raising activities stopped. Nevertheless, interventions continued, such as hotlines, telephone counselling, and legal support and PSS. Shelters and safe spaces operated partially and cases were referred to Mental Health and Psycho-Social Support (MHPSS). After lockdown, activities such as literacy and vocational training classes resumed.

The NGO ACT in **Egypt** adapted its child marriage service programmes during COVID-19, using, for example, social media platforms to raise awareness. It also held Zoom meetings with members of parliament urging them to pass a law criminalising child marriage in the framework of the “Not Before 18” campaign, which is supported by more than fifty NGOs and institutions. In addition, within communities that could not be reached because of the pandemic, female volunteers and community leaders continued to raise awareness about child marriage.

In **Djibouti**, UNICEF replaced in-person activities with on-line activities using online platforms for discussions about reproductive health (RH) and the different manifestations of GBV, including child marriage.⁶⁶

IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON SERVICES

Local partners in **Egypt** said the COVID-19 pandemic highlighted the challenges of schools in remote and poor areas that do not have internet networks to provide online classes. Even when available, families often cannot afford the costs.

According to a rapid assessment of the impact of COVID-19 in **Jordan** conducted in April 2020,⁶⁷ GBV, particularly domestic violence, has increased since the pandemic while accessing GBV and sexual and reproductive health (SRH) services has become more difficult. Some women and girls reported using virtual SRH and GBV services. Others reported having less information about accessing SRH services during the lockdown than before.⁶⁸

One UNICEF local partner NGO in **Morocco** noted that COVID-19 had led to the failure of basic services, the exacerbation of existing inequalities between the sexes and social groups and exposed the defects of the economic and social system. Women were the biggest victims and their inability to obtain travel permits impacted access to sexual and reproductive health services. Even when services remained open, many women refrained from accessing them because they feared COVID-19 infection. NGOs set up alternative digital support services for women and girl victims of violence, mainly mobile phone groups.

UNICEF in **Morocco** tried to ensure continuity of essential services for children and adolescents. UNICEF supported more than 1.1 million students in continuing their education by procuring tablets for vulnerable children and supporting access by lower secondary students to Life Skills and Citizenship Education. Materials and video clips were provided through the Ministry of Education’s national distance learning platform TelmidTice. Around 200 boarding facilities for girls were equipped with hygiene and protection kits.

In order to improve the Ministry of Health’s data collection systems and to allow for better management, monitoring and response to violence against children and GBV, UNICEF supported a national information system within the 113 units of care for women and child victims. Beni-In Mellal Khenifra, one of the Moroccan regions with the highest rate of child marriage, hospitals were equipped with office and IT equipment to improve quality of care. UNICEF also supported the training of 68 civil society partners on violence against women and girls, risk mitigation and referral mechanisms.

64 UNICEF Morocco. 2020. ‘Fiche thématique-mariages des enfants’

65 Gender network, Cluster Gender and GBV Focal Points Network in Yemen. November 2020-January 2021. ‘The Gendered impact of COVID-19 in Yemen.’

66 Buuti.tv for UNFPA Djibouti. Mawahib-Talk. Le Mariage Précoce
Buuti.tv for UNFPA Djibouti. Fatma Ali Chireh, présidente de l’association des sages-femmes de Djibouti. Entretiens
Buuti.tv for UNFPA Djibouti. Micro-trottoir sur les violences domestiques et le harcèlement sexuel
Mawahib-Talk. La Toxicomanie
Buuti.tv for UNFPA Djibouti. Maki Omar, secrétaire général de la justice. Entretiens
Buuti.tv for UNFPA Djibouti. Table ronde sur les violences fondées sur le genre
Buuti.tv for UNFPA Djibouti. Saharha Hassan, coordinatrice de la cellule d’écoute pour la prise en charge des cas de VGF/MGF. Entretiens
Buuti.tv for UNFPA Djibouti. Les droits reproductifs
Buuti.tv for UNFPA Djibouti. Table ronde sur la protection contre l’exploitation et l’abus sexuel
Buuti.tv for UNFPA Djibouti. Mini-série sur les violences domestiques
Buuti.tv for UNFPA Djibouti. Mini-série le harcèlement sexuel
Buuti.tv for UNFPA Djibouti. Mini-série sur le viol et la tentative de viol
Buuti.tv for UNFPA Djibouti. MouninaHoumed Hassan, ministre de la femme et de la famille. Entretiens
Buuti.tv for UNFPA Djibouti. Mini-série sur les MGF
Buuti.tv for UNFPA Djibouti. Micro-trottoir sur le mariage précoce et les MGF
Buuti.tv for UNFPA Djibouti. Slam sur les conditions de vie des femmes

67 UNFPA, Noor El Hussein Foundation, Plan International. April-May 2020. ‘Daring to ask, listen, and act: A snapshot of the impact of COVID-19 on women and girls’ rights and sexual and reproductive health.’ p. 2

68 Ibid.

“During the lockdowns caused by COVID-19... the situation was even worse because people could not move and weddings became much cheaper than in normal times. What are now called ‘corona weddings’ are not very expensive weddings. They take place very simply at home, even for more than one daughter, maybe three weddings for three daughters in one event and for very little money... During COVID-19 times, people cannot say that you are a cheap person if you do not spend much for the wedding of your daughter. We can say the COVID-19 lockdowns worked as incentives for marriage and child marriage. For instance, even if there was a relative that was trying to convince family members that child marriage was not good, now due to COVID-19 he/she cannot interfere anymore in the decision.”

- Key informant from Sudan

UNFPA in Morocco worked on the continuity of reproductive health services and mobilised funds to improve the use of services that had been interrupted. They supported the development of an app calling on women to visit hospitals, which increased the utilisation of essential services. An app was also developed for social assistants in hospitals working with women who are survivors of violence. Social assistants were provided with tablets, allowing them also to connect remotely with women.

In **Sudan**, the number of clients attending RH/Family Planning (FP) clinics fell in compliance with COVID-19 movement restrictions and most service providers focused their activities on COVID-19 prevention and awareness. Nevertheless, misinformation about COVID-19 and the fear of contracting it resulted in reduced health-promoting behaviour among the public. Alternative communication

channels were used to try to help those who needed SRH services. However, the provision of SRH and FP services declined due to the restrictions and closure of many primary health care centres.⁶⁹

In **Yemen**, the majority of rural women, especially older women, had limited access to information on COVID-19 prevention and response. Nevertheless, women showed a great deal of resilience to save the lives of their families, secure livelihoods and provide health care. Despite its negative impact, the pandemic provided new opportunities to promote gender equality and women have more access to knowledge and public spaces. Some CSOs, particularly women’s and youth organizations, actively responded to the pandemic crisis with infection prevention and control (IPC) and RH facilities.⁷⁰

⁶⁹ UNFPA Arab States Office & Middle East and North Africa Health Policy Forum. 2020. ‘Assessment of the impact and policy implications of the COVID-19 pandemic on Sexual and Reproductive Health (SRH) in Arab countries.’ p. 3.
⁷⁰ Ibid.



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Promising practices

To address and prevent child marriage, it is necessary to adopt an integrated and multi-sectoral approach. In some countries, the issue of child marriage is raised within communities in connection with FGM prevention activities. In others, it is integrated within the framework of activities on GBV or addressed within schools.

The promising practices presented in this chapter are alternative approaches to traditional programmatic work that was used in the six countries to overcome challenges presented by COVID-19.

Some of the promising practices refer to GBV prevention interventions that were adapted to COVID-19 and have the potential for adaptation to include specific child marriage prevention activities. Other approaches provide conditional cash assistance to vulnerable families of at-risk girls, given that poverty is one of the main determinants of child marriage.

A snapshot of some of these promising approaches is provided below.

1. In order to adapt to the COVID-19 situation, UNICEF in **Egypt** supported local workers with training on **MHPSS** with a focus on child marriage and child labour. Phone calls were conducted with 20,000 households to inform them about available helplines and support during COVID-19. Some 7,900 parents were reached by phone in four governorates in Upper Egypt. In the course of these telephone conversations, some cases were referred for PSS.

Terre des hommes (TdH) introduced **RIDE ON**⁷¹ - a remote, self-guided course aimed at promoting adolescent well-being, which is key to supporting child marriage program-

ming when there is no physical access to girls and adolescents. It was piloted during the COVID-19 pandemic in **Jordan and Egypt** and is now being translated into Arabic. It is a promising tool that will be scaled-up in the organization's child marriage prevention programming in the region. It has been developed to support child protection professionals to reach out remotely to children and adolescents to address anxiety and feelings of insecurity or disconnection.

2. In **Jordan**, emerging solutions that could be used for potential victims of child marriage include **adapting existing physical safe spaces for women and girls with GBV phone booth stations**, where phone-based case management support can be given and where survivors can call GBV case workers, who are on standby at set times to provide support.⁷²
3. **CARE Jordan** worked to provide at-risk girls with continued access to education during the pandemic. It provided **conditional cash assistance to families of at-risk girls**, who received financial support in exchange for ensuring that girls remained in school. Families were provided with JD70 (US\$100) per month to help cover essential expenses as well as training on protection issues and referrals to services.⁷³
4. UNICEF **Morocco** supported the government's response to vulnerabilities caused by the COVID-19 outbreak. They developed and shared with COVID-19 Watch Committees⁷⁴ **costings of cash transfers to poor and vulnerable households**, together with

71 Ride On

72 SGBV Working Group Jordan, April 2020. 'Guidance note on GBV Service provision during COVID-19 in Jordan and a forward look at a safe resume of service,' p. 5.

73 CARE, October 2020. 'Girl-driven change. Meeting the needs of Adolescent girls during COVID-19 and beyond,' p. 26.

74 The Watch committee is the "Economic Watch Committee for monitoring the impact of the Covid-19 and identifying accompanying measures" the official name in French "Comité de Veille Economique pour le suivi des répercussions du Corona Virus et l'identification des mesures d'accompagnement". It has been set in March 2020 within the Ministry of Finance, and includes several sectorial ministries and private sectors representatives, as part of the Government's efforts to anticipate economic impacts of the COVID 19

benchmarks on social protection emergency measures implemented in similar countries. **A COVID-19 Solidarity Fund was established raised up to US\$3.4 billion**⁷⁵ for funding emergency infection prevention and control measures as well as for mitigating economic and social impacts. UNICEF and the National Observatory of Human Development's modelling study on the impact of COVID-19 on child poverty in Morocco⁷⁶ demonstrated that due to the social protection measures put in place, an expected increase in child poverty was reduced by half to 5 per cent instead of an expected 10 per cent with no cash transfers.

5. **Tdh** in the Emirati Jordanian Camp (Mrajeeb Al Hood) in Zarqa governorate introduced a comprehensive package of interventions to prevent and respond to child protection and GBV issues affecting children and their families. COVID-19 restrictions had limited the capacities of children at risk of or exposed to child marriage to access appropriate and specialised services as well as opportunities to socialise and learn. Tdh in consultation with children and their caregivers redesigned activities to mitigate the risk to children and their families. Tdh also strengthened monitoring of children's protection from abuse, harm, exploitation and psychosocial distress.
6. **NajatBot, Kolona Maak and Shama robot:**⁷⁷ On 10 December 2020, which was Human Rights Day and the last of the "16 Days of Activism Against Gender-Based Violence" campaign, UNFPA and the National Union of Women of Morocco (UNFM) launched Najat-Bot, the first conversational software robot (chatbot) to help women and girls who are victims of violence. It orientates users towards the Kolona Maak (We are all with you) platform, which is dedicated to the protection and support of women and girls who are victims of violence. Available 24/7 and free via Facebook Messenger, NajatBot aims to improve access to national protection and support services. Shama, the first 100 percent Moroccan female robot, participated in the "16 Days of Activism Against Gender-Based Violence" campaign through a mobilisation video.⁷⁸

7. In **Sudan**, several NGOs and CSOs provided **RH/GBV services** using WhatsApp and mobile clinics. Guidelines and protocols were developed and providers were trained in provision of online consultations by ministries in collaboration with academia, national experts, NGOs and UN agencies.⁷⁹
8. Reaching out to communities and community dialogue is part of a strategy to combat FGM in **Sudan** through the **Saleema** initiative. Community facilitators were trained using positive messages and language while advocacy against FGM and child marriage was transmitted in the framework of these dialogues.
9. In **Yemen**, UNICEF-initiated **peer-to-peer** support functioned well at the community level. In the context of COVID-19, when programmes were suspended, implementing partners made sure that 10 per cent of adolescent girls who received training were supported to lead peer-to-peer awareness-raising activities within their communities on issues around gender norms and marriage. The peer-to-peer approach has been instrumental in keeping adolescents informed during COVID-19.
10. In the north of **Yemen**, UNFPA supports safe spaces under the Yemeni Women's Union, liaising with the Ministry of Health. The women were provided with resources to make masks, which were given to local pharmacies and hospitals. In remote areas, these safe spaces were the only places where masks were produced to be distributed to different facilities.

"The press and the state must provide improvement interventions and awareness raising on TV and on social media to stop child marriage."

Adolescent respondent

⁷⁵ This is a national fund that covers the whole government response to Covid-19 including the cash transfers to families and individuals economically impacted by the pandemic.

⁷⁶ UNICEF, ONDH, October 2020. 'Maroc : Impact de la pandémie Covid-19 sur la pauvreté des enfants'

⁷⁷ UNFPA and UNFM, December 2020. 'Mettre l'intelligence artificielle au service de la lutte contre la violence à l'égard des femmes au Maroc'

⁷⁸ UNFPA Maroc, 27 November 2020. '#JoinSHAMA pour une tolérance Zéro à la violence basée sur le genre'

⁷⁹ UNFPA Arab States Office & Middle East and North Africa Health Policy Forum, 2020. 'Assessment of the impact and policy implications of the COVID-19 pandemic on Sexual and Reproductive Health (SRH) in Arab countries.' p. 3.





Recommendations

The following recommendations take into consideration COVID-19's impact on child marriage but also other factors that were driving this harmful practice before the pandemic, some of which have been exacerbated. To combat child marriage efficiently, action must be taken through a **multi-sectoral and holistic approach**, that targets girls, parents, schools, communities and the broader legal and political system.

ECONOMIC INCENTIVES

Enhanced poverty alleviation interventions, cash transfers and other job benefits to enhance income security need to be urgently put in place. Opportunities for socio-economic empowerment should be offered to families in which girls and boys are at risk of child marriage.

Providing **incentives to girls not to marry**, giving them alternative opportunities such as the possibility of a career, starting a small business, developing entrepreneurial skills, vocational training etc. can mitigate the risk of child marriage.

EDUCATION

Safeguarding girls' access to school is crucial since education plays a role in both cause and effect of child marriage. Dropping out of school increases the risk of child marriage. At the same time, child marriage and early pregnancy induce girls to abandon education. It is important to **monitor remote learning access and support school re-entry** through the provision of **adequate services to adolescents who return to school**.

Conditional cash or in-kind support for girls' schooling, remedial "catch-up learning" programmes and mentoring programmes for girls can help to stop them dropping out of school and preventing child marriage.

Teachers and caregivers should be provided with **digital packs and training** to maintain regular communication with students during school closures and detect those at risk of child marriage and/or dropping out of school.

Adolescent girls and children with disabilities should be provided with inclusive opportunities to access distance learning programmes and the necessary devices, platforms and materials.

EDUCATIONAL CAMPAIGNS AND NATIONAL HOTLINE

Educational campaigns on child marriage prevention should be centred on the local community, mobilising the participation of all levels of society, including local governments, community leaders, NGOs and women's organizations. Campaign should also address the increased vulnerabilities of young girls and boys and the impact of COVID-19 on child marriage.

A **national hotline for reports and complaints by potential victims of child marriage** should operate with the resources to provide information, support and advice free of charge 24/7. Hotline staff should be aware of the detrimental impact of COVID-19 on child marriage.

GUARANTEE ACCESS TO SRH SERVICES

In order to mitigate the effects of the pandemic on adolescents' access to **SRH services**, radio or online platforms should be used to offer comprehensive sex education and SRH referrals.

ADOLESCENTS' VOICE & AGENCY

Adolescents need to be **part of the solution** and be involved in the design and implementation of child marriage programming, for example, by amplifying the efforts of youth associations and supporting their ability to share behaviour-change messaging in hard-to-reach locations.

To take into account COVID-19's impact on child marriage, it will be even more essential to provide **training and education opportunities to potential victims/victims of child marriage** as well as other forms of social support. The provision of **legal assistance** to victims of child marriage is also important.

SUPPORT OF INTERNET PROVISION

In remote and poor areas, a state, private sector or funding agency budget should provide internet use to poor households while internet companies should be encouraged to do so as part of their corporate social responsibility.

SOCIAL MEDIA

Making the effective use **of online platforms and social media** should focus not only on the detrimental effects of child marriage but also on the value of investing in daughters and the positive effects that investing in girls' education and health brings to the family, economy and entire society.

EVIDENCE GENERATION

It will be important to **gather quantitative and qualitative data at regional, national and community** levels on the pandemic's effect on child marriage to make an adequate response. **Focus group discussions, questionnaires and key informant** interviews such as the ones held for this study provide interesting suggestions and insights.

COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

COVID-19 has illustrated the importance of boosting internal resilience within communities. Identifying people in communities who can work as champions against child marriage can help to build community protection. These champions, who can be adolescents, women, and disabled and elderly people need be empowered to perform their role and trained in the use of the internet and social media.

SUPPORTIVE ENVIRONMENT

Child marriage cannot be eliminated without **political will and commitment** and should be a priority at the local and national level through legislation, national action plans and the allocation of sufficient resources.



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Conclusion

The COVID-19 pandemic was an unexpected challenge for the world and humanity and required innovative strategies. Programming and services put in place to combat and prevent harmful practices, such as child marriage, suffered interruptions and delays. At the same time, factors driving child marriage including poverty and inadequate education have been exacerbated and are a dangerous threat to the progress against child marriage worldwide.

According a report released by UNICEF on 8 March 2021,⁸⁰ the impact of COVID-19 on child marriage can be seen in five ways:

- **Interrupted education** and school closures increase child marriage risk by 25 per cent per year.
- **Higher pregnancy** rates as child marriage and dropping out of school rises.
- **Death of a parent** can also increase the likelihood that a female orphan will be married off, since family members may find it hard to support her.
- **Economic shocks** given that in countries where paying a bride price is common, loss of household income increases the probability of marriage by 3 per cent.
- **Disruptions to programmes and services** because delayed programmes to prevent child marriage are estimated to result in a one-year loss of gains from such programmes. Widely applied mobilisation of effective programming could reduce risk by 33 per cent in a mitigation scenario.

Data on the actual number of children who entered into early marriage since the beginning of the pandemic are not available yet. Nevertheless, even if we are not able to measure the actual impact of COVID-19 on child marriage, it can be predicted from the analysis of past public health crises that adolescent girls are going to be disproportionately affected in all areas of their life: physical and mental health and well-being; education; access to reproductive health; family planning and GBV services; and available opportunities for empowerment. Furthermore, girls are at increased risk of gender inequalities and food insecurity due to economic impoverishment of families and communities.

Adaptive strategies have been put in place at different levels. Where possible, face-to face activities were replaced with online activities and support for digitalisation and online education. Social media platforms, hotlines for potential victims of GBV and child marriage, tele-counseling, distribution of electronic devices to students, remote case-management, peer-to peer support, and cash transfers to vulnerable families were among the strategies put in place.

Providing family members with financial support and job opportunities were the most cited solutions to prevent an increase in child marriage. Increased awareness campaigns to prevent child marriage on television/radio/social media as well as listening to and providing PSS for adolescents were also suggested by many respondents. Attention should also be given to the suggestions of adolescents themselves.

Finally, it is important to remember that despite its negative impact, something positive will emerge from the pandemic, including the opportunity to promote gender equality and work to end child marriage using non-traditional means, such as digitalisation, virtual learning and artificial intelligence.

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